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Security Council

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Thursday, 13 February 2003, 10 a.m.

New York

President	Mr. Pleuger	(Germany)
Members	Angola	Mr. Lucas
	Bulgaria	Mr. Tafrov
	Cameroon	Mr. Belinga-Eboutou
	Chile	Mr. Valdes
	China	Mr. Wang Yingfan
	France	Mrs. D'Achon
	Guinea	Mr. Traoré
	Mexico	Mrs. Arce de Jeannet
	Pakistan	Mr. Khalid
	Russian Federation	Mr. Gatilov
	Spain	Mr. Arias
	Syrian Arab Republic	Mr. Wehbe
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Sir Jeremy Greenstock
	United States of America	Mr. Williamson

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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03-24603 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President: In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, and in the absence of objection, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Kieran Prendergast, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

It is so decided.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Security Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Mr. Kieran Prendergast, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs. I now give him the floor.

Mr. Prendergast: Since my last briefing to the Council on 16 January, violence between Israelis and Palestinians has continued unabated, resulting in further loss of life, in injury and in destruction. Moreover, the humanitarian crisis in the occupied Palestinian territories is worsening.

On the political side, parliamentary elections were held in Israel on 28 January, resulting in a substantial increase in seats for the Likud party, which is led by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Mr. Sharon has been requested by President Katzav to form a new Government. The new Israeli Government can be assured of the cooperation and full support of the international community if it takes steps that would move the Israeli-Palestinian conflict towards the two-State solution envisaged in Security Council resolution 1397 (2002), through which peace and security can be achieved for both peoples.

We welcome reports about a private meeting last week between Prime Minister Sharon and the Speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council, Mr. Ahmed Qurei, known as Abu Ala. This will hopefully mark the beginning of a renewed dialogue between the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority towards reaching a ceasefire understanding, which would greatly assist progress towards restoring trust and dialogue between the parties.

Without the prospect of some forward movement on the political front, it is difficult to envisage how the current cycle of violence and counter-violence can be stopped. As I have already indicated, the violence in the region has intensified, with deaths mounting day by day. Since my last briefing, 65 Palestinians and 7 Israelis have been killed, bringing the death toll since the outbreak of the second intifada in September 2000 to more than 2,300 Palestinians and nearly 700 Israelis. The Secretary-General is deeply disturbed at this mounting death toll, and he is gravely concerned for the future of both the Israeli and Palestinian peoples, as well as for the wider Middle East region, if death and destruction are not replaced by peace and reconciliation.

Developments in the past month give little cause for optimism and no room at all for complacency. On 25 January, after a number of Qassam rockets were fired by Palestinians on Israeli communities inside and outside the Gaza Strip, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) entered Gaza City in their biggest operation in the Gaza Strip since September 2000. That Israeli incursion left 13 Palestinians dead and scores injured.

As has been stated in previous briefings, Palestinian civilians often bear the brunt of Israel's military operations. Israel has the right to defend itself, but it must do so within the parameters of international law. As the occupying Power, Israel has particular responsibilities, which are clearly defined and set out in the Fourth Geneva Convention. Regrettably, Israel's actions are all too often at odds with those responsibilities. We are concerned, for example, by the continuing Israeli policy of demolition of Palestinian homes. In the Hebron area, the IDF incursion of 30 January resulted in the demolition of 22 Palestinian houses in and around the city. The IDF announced that on 3, 4 and 8 February, four houses were demolished in, respectively, Beit Furik in the Nablus area, the Muassi refugee camp in central Gaza and Nablus city. These demolitions are, in our view, measures of collective punishment that are violations of international humanitarian law and breaches of Israel's obligations as the occupying Power.

During the same incursion in Hebron on 30 January, Israeli bulldozers also levelled 100 stalls in the Hebron market. Earlier, on 21 January, the IDF had demolished 62 shops and market stalls in the Palestinian village of Nazlat Issa, in the Tulkarem area.

Since my last briefing, attacks by Palestinian groups have claimed the lives of seven Israelis, including one civilian. Israel continues to report interceptions of suicide bombers attempting to enter Israeli territory. The Secretary-General has consistently and repeatedly condemned terrorist attacks as morally repugnant. They are also counter-productive, because terrorism undermines the pursuit of legitimate Palestinian national aspirations and is an obstacle to the resumption of a sustainable peace process.

We have welcomed the efforts of the Government of Egypt, through meetings it has hosted in Cairo, to encourage talks among Palestinian groups on adopting a ceasefire. We call on all concerned parties to do whatever they can to facilitate the continuation and fruitful conclusion of this dialogue.

On 16 January, I told the Council that

> "there has been no appreciable improvement in the humanitarian situation in the occupied Palestinian territory since the previous briefing, and Israel still has not fulfilled the commitments it made to the Secretary-General's Personal Humanitarian Envoy last August". (*S/PV.4685, p. 3*)

Unfortunately, stringent closures and curfews continue to cause the deterioration of economic conditions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and to hamper the work of the international donor community. Again, I take this opportunity to remind Israel, as the occupying Power, of its obligations and responsibilities under the Fourth Geneva Convention for the well-being of the Palestinian population.

While the humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate, the capacity of the international community to respond to growing needs among Palestinians is, unfortunately, eroding. The Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), Mr. Peter Hansen, has warned that by the end of next month his organization will be in danger of running out of resources for its emergency activities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Today, UNRWA is feeding 1.1 million people in the occupied Palestinian territory. This crisis has occurred because UNRWA's appeal for $94 million to replenish its dwindling emergency fund has gone largely unheeded.

We call on the international community to respond generously to UNRWA's appeal so as to prevent a diminution of its capacity to continue to answer growing calls for assistance. Although the primary solution to the humanitarian crisis in the West Bank and Gaza Strip lies in the lifting of curfews and closures so as to facilitate the resumption of economic life in the occupied Palestinian territory, donor support for UNRWA's appeal is essential for meeting immediate needs.

I ought to say that there are a few tentative positive signs of hope amidst this very bleak picture. The Palestinian reform process continues to progress, with the active support of the international community. Prime Minister Blair's meeting in London last month on the issue of Palestinian reform will be followed by a further series of meetings. These will include: first, meetings of Quartet envoys; secondly, a capitals-level donor Ad Hoc Liaison Committee meeting on international assistance to the Palestinian people; and, thirdly, meetings of the Task Force on Palestinian Reform. All of these meetings will take place in London between 18 and 20 February. The United Nations and other participants hope to build on the success of the January meeting in order to inject new impetus into the reform process, as well as into the efforts of the donor nations to address the humanitarian crisis.

The United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General to the Palestinian Authority, Mr. Terje Roed-Larsen, and two of his fellow Quartet envoys, Ambassador Moratinos of the European Union and Ambassador Vdovin of the Russian Federation, met on 11 February with Chairman Arafat and senior officials of the Palestinian Authority. They discussed the upcoming London meetings, and called on Chairman Arafat to take bold and immediate steps to support and facilitate institutional and security reform ahead of those meetings. Representatives of the Quartet will be having follow-up meetings with Mr. Arafat and other senior Palestinian officials later this week. Mr. Roed-Larsen has also remained in close contact on this issue with senior officials in Israel and neighbouring countries.

Turning to other developments since the previous briefing to the Council, I ought to say there has been an increase in tension along the Blue Line. On 21 January, after almost five months of relative calm, Hezbollah targeted IDF positions in the Shab'a farms area with mortars and missiles, obviously in clear violation of the Blue Line. The IDF responded shortly afterwards, leading, regrettably, to one Lebanese civilian being killed and another wounded.

I would like to note once again that the Secretary-General confirmed and the Security Council endorsed in June 2000 that Israel had withdrawn its forces from Lebanon, in accordance with Security Council resolution 425 (1978). Both Israel and Lebanon pledged to respect the line identified by the United Nations for this purpose, commonly referred to as the Blue Line. The Lebanese Government should therefore fulfil its responsibility to maintain calm along the entire length of the Line. We have noted the increased deployment of the Lebanese Joint Security Forces in the south, and we hope that this reflects a commitment by the Lebanese authorities to ensure calm.

Israeli warplanes continue to violate the Blue Line and Lebanese airspace on a regular basis. Various sources, including the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, have indicated that the last week of January witnessed a marked increase in the number of these overflights. Israeli jets were reported to have flown at low altitudes over populated areas. The Government of Lebanon protested to the United Nations about these violations of its airspace. These Israeli overflights, and the anti-aircraft fire they draw, carry a potential for escalation, especially in the currently tense regional situation.

I should also mention that the Wazzani/Hasbani water issue continues to be a source of tension and possible escalation between Lebanon and Israel. The Government of Lebanon has expressed its willingness to find a negotiated solution through the good offices of the Secretary-General. The Government of Israel, however, has not yet expressed its wish to use the good offices of the United Nations in order to reach an agreement between the two sides on the use of water in this area. Meanwhile, we call on the Government of Lebanon to continue to respect its commitments not to expand its water projects beyond what is already stated in its report until the matter comes to a resolution.

Last month, I briefed the Council on the shooting incident on 8 January in the Golan Heights, which resulted in the death of a Syrian soldier. I would like to commend both Israel and Syria on their handling of that incident, which they did not allow to escalate. However, the incident has served as a reminder of the great sensitivity of the Golan area. Both sides must act with the utmost caution and with full respect for the terms of the disengagement agreement. I am sure that they will do so. Both sides should also refrain from actions that could jeopardize the status quo and create further friction.

At this particularly precarious time across the Middle East, I would like to urge all parties to exercise maximum restraint in their words and deeds. Every effort must be made to enhance stability and, correspondingly, to avoid actions that could contribute to a further destabilization of present conditions.

The situation in the Middle East remains very serious. Despite this, the best path towards ensuring the security of Israelis and Palestinians, and achieving a comprehensive regional peace, remains moving forward with the Quartet's road map. The road map's approach of addressing the inextricably linked issues of security, political progress and economic development in parallel would enable progress in each area to buttress progress in the others. We remain convinced that the early implementation of the road map would break the current stalemate and allow Israelis and Palestinians actively to pursue their legitimate aspirations at the negotiating table. Through this process, the parties could realize the vision of two States — Israel and an independent, viable, sovereign and democratic Palestine — living side by side in peace and security.

The longer implementation of this vision is delayed, the farther apart Israel and the Palestinians will move and the longer it will take for them to build the trust and confidence that is a prerequisite for their mutual security and, ultimately, for a just and comprehensive settlement. The realization of this vision is entirely dependent on the political will of the parties. But it is also incumbent on the international community and on the Quartet, individually and collectively, consistently to encourage the parties to embrace this vision and the road map wholeheartedly.

The President: I thank the Under-Secretary-General for his comprehensive briefing.

In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I should now like to invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 10.30 a.m.